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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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As has been the norm lately, I’m way behind getting this week’s issue ready, and out to our readers. Another long and tiring week, topped off with a wet snowstorm during my only day off this week, on Wednesday. I spent most of that day cleaning up the 6+ inches of the heavy, wet white stuff. It didn’t seem like we got that much snow, but that’s what our local weather guy said was the official measurement. Whatever it was, I’m tired and sore from cleaning it up! At least the dogs love being out in it, so all is not lost!

So, I don’t have anything really thought-provoking to talk about this week. I need to get this issue out, and have a little time to plan tomorrow’s holiday shopping adventure (I hate holiday shopping!!) with my wife. Fortunately for me, my wife has done a lot of shopping already, without leaving the house! Shopping online does have its advantages!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone and we find ourselves a week closer to Christmas. I don’t know about you, but I’m not even close to being ready for it. So many loved ones to buy things for, so many cards to write out, so many arrangements to make.

But to quote Arlo Guthrie, "but that’s not what I came to tell ya about". I came to talk about politics. [grin]

Last week I mentioned Charles F. Johnson and his change toward the far right. Well, that’s not exactly fair and not exactly accurate. Let’s call it his... formal break with the far right, shall we?

Now Charles has his own reasons for breaking with the "birthers" and "teabaggers" and all the rest. And his reasons, not to put too fine a

point on it, were my reasons almost a decade ago. Well, 8 years ago, anyway. And it wasn't that I EVER agreed with the far right either. I've always been a liberal... and actually, Charles had too. But I'll not put words in his mouth. You can probably find his own words right there on his own website: http://littlegreenfootballs.com

I've checked in on the blog every once in a while over the past couple of weeks, and I'm still not sure of what I think of it. Technically, I'm in awe. It's very well done. Content-wise? I'm still undecided.

One thing I'm NOT undecided about, though, is everybody's favorite horny drunken cheerleader turned Governor turned author, Sara Palin.

Mrs. Palin has been making "the rounds", talking about various things that make her feel good... evidently, if she were a male, she'd be waving a particular appendage around and slamming it on any available table.

Now, I know people born and raised in Alaska (which she was not, by the way), and they ARE an odd breed of people. They're proud, hard working, very resilient and ALMOST as cocky as Texans. [chuckle]

There is, however, a line that one must be aware of whether one chooses to cross it or not. That line, my friends, is the dividing line between science and politics. You thought I was going to say 'faith', didn't you? That's okay. People often see the two as in opposition. But the fact is that they are not... or at least they don't have to be.

But that's not my point today. My point is that if you're going to label scientists and science as "troublemakers" and "scare tactics", you probably should at least have an inkling of what you're talking about. And I don't think that's the case with Mrs. Palin (Is it proper to refer to her as Governor even though she quit... to prove, she says, that she isn't a quitter?).

The fact that Sarah honey supports the idea that global warming is a myth AND that it's real, but a 'natural fluctuation' tells me that she's willing to play to whatever audience she happens to find herself in front of.

"Well, that's politics" some will say. Sorry. I couldn't disagree more... that's dogma. Something that has no place in American politics.

To begin with, global warming IS happening. The ice sheets, glaciers and ice caps are all decreasing in size. That tells us that there is something going on. And it doesn't take a genius to realize that ice reflects more light and, therefore, heat than ocean water does. Less ice because of warming means more warming. That part really IS as simple as that.

What isn't as simple is the idea of what drives weather on this planet. THAT is a very complex concept. Where people tend to diverge here is that some will LEAVE it to the scientific minds who have spent years and, in some cases, decades studying and struggling to understand the intricacies of what we call climate.

One of my favorite 'gag lines' is when there's a heavy snow somewhere in the 'States and a late-night comedian says, "Due to the snowstorm, the conference on global warming has been canceled".

Yeah, it's funny.. unless you happen to be stuck in it. You see, one of

the ’features’ of global warming is that it happens more at the equator than at high latitudes. That makes the temperature difference between extreme north and extreme south and the equator much larger. And when two weather systems of vastly different temperatures get together? Blammo! (Yes folks, that’s a technical term [grin])

Another thing to take into account is that water absorbs more light and, therefore, more heat than land. There’re two points here: First that water is dynamic... it moves. Land is more static. The heat built up in land tends to stay where it is. The ocean currents, however, spread it around. The other thing to keep in mind is that there’s more land than ocean in the northern hemisphere, and more ocean than land in the southern... so right there, there’s the makings of a big difference.

The ocean currents are fueled by temperature differences. Change the temperatures and you change the currents. Change the currents and you change the temperature even more. Change the temperature even more and you change the currents even more... get the idea?

Now, for those who deny that change is taking place, all I can say is to look out their window. If you can see Russia, strip down to your skivvies and go for a swim.

For those who say "yeah, the climate IS changing, but it’s a natural thing and Mankind couldn’t possibly be responsible because the Earth is so big and, damn, all we’re doing is putting a little bit of smoke and some invisible gas into the air... and it gets carried away"... well, where do I even start? The most conservative estimates I’ve seen are in the many tens of billions of tons of CO2. Yes, the Earth itself absorbs some of that through the oceans, but that tens of billions of tons is the EXTRA we’re pumping into the atmosphere. Mother Earth can only do so much. And what does it matter to her anyway? She’ll be fine regardless. She’s got all the time in the... well, world. She’ll just sit back and wait for us to purge ourselves from her visage and then start over again as if nothing ever happened.

And yes, there’s history in the global record that says that the climate varies, but is that really any consolation? If the U.S. ’Grain Belt’ becomes an arid desert, will it make any difference whether we caused it or not? Will THAT make corn grow without rainfall? Will the belief that nature has its own rhythm make it any easier to buy summer produce from Siberia all year long?

My point here is that, if you accept that global warming IS happening, whether due to humanity or not, you should also accept that it only makes sense to do everything we can to stop it.

It galls me to hear the words "scare tactics" used in talking about global warming by the very same conservatives who ran around 8 years ago yelling "Fear! Osama! Nine-Eleven! Fear! Saddam! Dubya-Em-Dees! New-Q-ler! Fear!" and I’m left to wonder if they don’t, in fact, see the folly, or if they simply decide that they’re ’allowed’.

Well, that’s it for this week, friends and neighbors. Please consider picking up an extra can or bag or box of something at the grocery store and dropping it off at the local food share, shelter, church, temple or whatever. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'Avatar' - Stunning, But Average!
Video Games in Education!
M.U.L.E. Reborn Online!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

'Avatar' Game A Stunning, Average Shooter

Video games based on movies are often pushed through as afterthoughts, so word that director James Cameron and Ubisoft have been collaborating for years on his sci-fi epic, "Avatar," offered hope to gamers longing to explore the lush, brightly colored jungles of Pandora.

"James Cameron's Avatar: The Game" ($59.99 for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, $49.99 for the Wii and PC) does nail the visuals, but it falls a bit short on gameplay as just an average third-person shooter.

The story line is a prequel to the movie, which opens in theaters next week.

Your character, "Able" Ryder, arrives on Pandora as a soldier working for the RDA Corp., which is mining the picturesque moon for rare minerals.

The corporation is engaged deep in a scientific experiment that allows Ryder and other soldiers to take the shape of their avatars - hybrid blends of human DNA and that of Pandora's indigenous species, the 10-foot-tall blue Na'vi.

Early in the quest, Ryder must choose to fight alongside the Na'vi to push back the military onslaught or lock and load as an RDA soldier battling the native inhabitants. This decision not only has moral implications, it also branches the player off on one of two completely different game experiences.

The military path offers Ryder a healthy arsenal of handguns, rifles and shotguns, and he can earn experience points throughout the quests to unlock upgrades and new weapons and armor. Buggy vehicles, Gator riverboats and Scorpion attack helicopters allow the soldier to cover more ground, and his ammo can be replenished at A-POD stations placed throughout the landscape.

There’s no "Gears of War"-style cover system, so Ryder must move and target or charge in with guns blazing.

Fighting as a Na’vi arms Ryder’s avatar with seemingly primitive yet effective weapons such as fighting staffs, dual blades and a bow and arrow. The staffs and blades are effective for up-close melees, but he’ll often need to rely on his bows, an occasional machine gun or special powers.

The Na’vis can’t jump into vehicles, but their towering size and agility allow them to traverse Pandora with ease. They can also jump on Direhorses to gallop or take control of the dragonlike flying Banshees for air strikes.

I enjoyed playing from this perspective, but the camera angles often proved frustrating during battle. And when your character is 10 feet tall, the puny humans disappear into the colorful scenery, making them tough to spot and target.

The game is visually stunning, and the chromatic landscape is filled with myriad plants and creatures to encounter and identify.

But the linear quests grow tedious, and the story doesn’t draw you in enough to make you feel engaged while gathering a list of objects or killing multiple enemies.

Two-and-a-half stars out of four.

Video Games Take Bigger Role in Education

Teachers trying to get students interested in molecular biology or space now have a new tool - video games.

As more children grow up playing video games, educators are partnering with game developers and scientists to create new interactive experiences for the classroom.

A trio of new games were developed to make subjects like world culture, molecular biology and space exploration more accessible and fun for young minds.

According to a new "Kids and Gaming 2009" report from The NPD Group, among all children in the United States aged 2-17, 82 percent, or 55.7 million, are currently gamers.

Of these gamers, 9.7 million are aged 2-5, representing the smallest segment, while 12.4 million are aged 9-11, making up the largest segment.

Just as kids have embraced music videogames like Activision’s "Guitar Hero 5" and MTV Games’ "The Beatles: Rock Band" and sports games like Electronic Arts’ "Madden NFL 10" and "FIFA 10," educators and researchers are hoping games like "Immune Attack," "Discover Babylon," and Virtual Heroes’ "Astronaut: Moon, Mars & Beyond" will engage and educate youngsters.

The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) game developer Escape Hatch Entertainment created "Immune Attack" to plunge 7th through 12th graders

into the microscopic world of immune system proteins and cells.

The goal of the game is to save a patient suffering from a bacterial infection. Along the way, players gain an understanding of cellular biology and molecular science.

"This is a first-person shooter in which the objects you need to activate with your ray gun are proteins on the interior surface of the veins," explained Melanie Ann Stegman, PhD, a program manager at FAS.

"This integration of molecular science with the game took a big collaboration between scientists at Brown and our game designer."

Stegman said data from kids who played the game show that they're picking up much more than just vocabulary.

Students are learning intuitively how the cellular world works, including complex concepts like the functions of Monocytes and the molecular interactions among human complement factors and bacterial surface proteins. A sequel is already in development for next year.

"As long as games are designed to be engaging, exciting and competitive I think they can be easily tailored toward educational purposes," said Tad Raudman, a science instructor at University Preparatory School in Redding, California, whose students played "Immune Attack."

"Approximately 10 percent of lifetime learning happens in the formal (K-12)educational setting. If games are played several hours a week on average, they can have a significant outcome on learning in both formal and informal settings."

The FAS also worked with UCLA's Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative and the Walters Art Museum to create "Discover Babylon," a game aimed at 8 to 12 year-olds that teaches about the significance of Mesopotamia in world culture using library and museum objects.

"Quality videogames are very important in education because they reach some students who otherwise could not be taught," said Clara J. Heyder, physiology and pathology teacher at Bayside High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

"Cideogames encompass visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning which are very important for learning."

On January 18, serious games developer ARA/Virtual Heroes will release a free downloadable prototype game called "MoonBase Alpha," which has been designed in conjunction with NASA engineers and astronauts to teach STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education to students across the United States.

The first-person perspective game thrusts players 30 years into the future and requires players to team up and use real match and scientific thinking to overcome challenges that astronauts might one day face.

"MoonBase Alpha" is a free predecessor to a new massively-multiplayer online game, "Astronaut: Moon, Mars & Beyond," which will be released later in 2010.

Jerry Heneghan, founder and CEO of ARA/Virtual Heroes, said the game will be an immersive platform, allowing multiple curriculum modules for

teachers to incorporate the game into learning about science, technology, engineering and math for both the classroom and at home.

"Students can pick a role like a roboticist, science officer, commander, or space engineer and work as a team on missions to perform experiments, solve space problems, and save the colonies from a myriad of potentially catastrophic situations," he said.

Video-Game Weakness May Result in a Down Year

Despite record-breaking sales of a single video-game title and a good showing from Nintendo, the gaming industry showed weakness in November. Research from the NPD Group found strong possibilities of a down year for the video-game industry.

NPD reports video-game software and hardware revenue declined 7.6 percent in November from the year-ago period to $2.69 billion. Although many in the industry expected slight growth in video-game sales in November, the numbers show a 3.1 percent decline.

Indeed, declining video-game sales are especially surprising - and telling - given the blockbuster performance of Activision’s highly anticipated Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 title that debuted in November. Activision sold 6.1 million units of the popular franchise and poised the industry for gains. But other game titles didn’t hit their sales targets and ultimately dragged down the results.

"In order to break even to last year, December sales would have to be up 36 percent over December 2008," said NPD analyst Anita Frazier. "Breaking even seems more out of reach."

It wasn’t just software sales that took a hit. Hardware sales were also down in November. Sales of video-game consoles dropped a collective 13.4 percent despite the sales rush on Black Friday. Nintendo fared well overall, selling 1.26 million Wiis to lead the hardware pack.

Microsoft sold 820,000 Xbox 360s and Sony sold a third-place 710,000 PlayStation 3 units. Still, despite its low position, Sony posted year-over-year growth with its PS3s. Sales of the console rose nearly 90 percent over November 2008, while Xbox sales were down two percent and Wii sales plunged 35 percent.

"Nintendo products top Amazon.com’s most-wished-for and most-gifted lists for video games, and Wii remains at or near the top of the most-searched-for video-game terms on Yahoo," Nintendo. "As families and friends gather for the holidays, Nintendo games offer the best shared experiences."

Based on NPD’s forecasts, video-game industry growth doesn’t look good for 2009. Still, as Michael Gartenberg, a vice president at Interpret, sees it, it’s too early to call winners and losers.

"We are in the midst of the buying season right now," Gartenberg said. "It’s going to be a question of whether or not consumers will reach down into their wallets and what are they seeing as compelling items. It does seem like overall technology is going to do well."

While it’s possible that consumers won’t invest in new devices, new ancillary services and new software - consumers may look to spend on other categories this year - Gartenberg cautions against drawing conclusions too early.

"I think we are going to see consumers tempted by various bundles or to pick up things they don’t currently have," Gartenberg said. "Any way you look at it, it’s still going to be a fairly challenging season. It’s not necessarily going to be the growth we saw a few years go."

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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M.U.L.E. Reborn Online

M.U.L.E., released in 1983 by the fledgling Electronic Arts, and designed by Dani Bunten of Ozark Softscape, is one of the original multiplayer strategy games. Originally released for the Atari 400/800, and later the Commodore 64, IBM PC Jr, and Nintendo Entertainment System, M.U.L.E. was a four-player strategy game that relied heavily on its simulation of an economic system. Set on the fictional planet of Irata (that’s Atari backwards) players were tasked with balancing the supply and demand of an assortment of different resources; food, energy, smithore, and crystite by buying and selling them with other players. The M.U.L.E.s of the title were "Multi Use Labor Elements" - mechanical beasts of burden that were used to develop and harvest resources on Irata.

Not only was the game unique for its reliance on economic systems, rather than combat for its strategic gameplay, it was also unusual in that it was always a four-player game, whether other human players were present or not. In this regard, it paved the way for numerous other multi-faction strategy games, including spiritual successors like Sid Meier’s Civilization. According to lead designer Bunten the game was somewhat inspired by Monopoly, and the setting of Irata themed on Robert A. Heinlein’s Time Enough for Love.

Why the quick history lesson? Well, after years of fans saying "someone should remake M.U.L.E. and make it an online game," someone finally has. Developed by Swedish studio Turborilla with the blessings of the Bunten family, the free-to-play Planet M.U.L.E <http://www.planetmule.com/>. is a faithful reproduction of the original (albeit with slightly updated visuals) that works either online, or over a local network. Currently there are (free) clients for both the PC and the Mac with a Linux version pending. Given that the game only launched yesterday, and it is, to all intents and purposes a labor of love, it’s not without some quirks. As a multiplayer game, it relies on community involvement, obviously, but it should also be noted that any kind of matchmaking is done the old-fashioned way; you show up in the game’s forums <http://www.planetmule.com/forum> and find some buddies to play with. Also, we’ve noticed that some folks are having some issues with this initial release. Mac owners, in particular, have noted that they’ve had

some troubles getting the game to run. Bizarrely the game is a downloadable Java application. Nope, not a web app and not a Flash app - Java. Also, it’s not exactly the friendliest game in the world to set up. Players wishing to host a game are informed that they must change settings to their firewall in order to do so. If you can’t affect the settings on your home network, you’re not going to be able to host a game and control the people that come into it. You’ll still be able to join other games, just not start your own.

While all of this is more exciting to those of us of an... ahem... older persuasion, newbies are welcome in the Planet M.U.L.E. community, and there’s a full tutorial on how to play the game that you can find here <http://www.planetmule.com/how-to-play>. It should probably be noted that the game is an incredibly faithful revival of the original game. While the gameplay stands the test of time remarkably well, some of the quirky content that made the original so amusing back in 1983 seems a little weird now. References to joysticks notwithstanding, there are also some comments that may seem a little off-color in today’s society. Things like "Space Gypsy Cousins" may prompt the occasional wince.

If you want to try the game out, you can download it for free at the Planet M.U.L.E. website.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Savvy Kids Can Access Explicit Online Worlds

Even a minimally savvy youngster can figure out how to access violent or explicitly sexual content in some virtual or Internet worlds, the Federal Trade Commission said on Thursday.

In its survey of online worlds, where users create digital alter egos called avatars and interact with other users’ avatars, the commission found that seven of the worlds with the most explicit sex and violence set a minimum age of 13 and an eighth set a minimum age of 18.

If children below age 13 attempted to register, they were rejected at five of the sites.

"However, two worlds, Kaneva and There.com, rejected child registrations, but then immediately permitted users to re-register as an adult from the same computer," the report said.

Kaneva did not respond to an attempt to reach it for comment but Michael Wilson, CEO of There.com, said that they were looking to address the situation and that they tried to keep their world relatively free of sex and violence.

"We recognize that that’s a problem and we’re trying to deal with it,"

he told Reuters. "The amount of violent content and sexual content that they'll find in There is minimal."

Red Light Center, which sets a minimum age of 18 and whose home page contains nudity, also allowed users who were rejected as too young to immediately try again with a different birthday.

"Red Light Center's main purpose is to offer sexually explicit content," the FTC report said. "Yet it employed no mechanism to limit access to underage users at the time of the Commission's study. Indeed, when the Commission selected the virtual world for inclusion in its review, demographic data from comScore, Inc. indicated that nearly 16 percent of Red Light Center's users were under age 18."

Red Light did not return a telephone call seeking comment.

As part of the report, which was requested by Congress, the commission recommended virtual world operators develop better mechanisms to screen out children and ensure that adults in these virtual worlds do not interact with children or teens.

The commission also urged better enforcement of the online world's rules regarding profanity in sites aimed at children, and training for community enforcers or moderators to enforce any rules.

Facebook Rolls Out New Privacy Tool

Facebook on Wednesday began calling on users to get a better grip on their online privacy by dictating who sees what in profiles at the world's leading social networking service.

All of Facebook's more than 350 million members will be required to refine settings with a new software tool that lets them specify who gets to be privy to each photo, video, update or other piece of content uploaded to the website.

"We care so much about this that we will require people to go through it to get access to the service," Facebook vice president of global communications, marketing and public policy Elliot Schrage told AFP.

"The idea is to evolve, to give users better control of with whom they share when they share."

The change promises to help Facebook users prevent embarrassing images or overly revealing updates from being seen by business acquaintances, bosses or others not part of inner circles of online friends.

"You will have the opportunity to customize even individual pieces of content when you upload a picture or a video," Schrage said.

"If you want to share a photo with just your family, you could do that as well. It is much more straightforward."

The new privacy tools let Facebook members pre-determine accessibility to profile content in categories designated "Friends," "Friends of Friends," "Everyone" and "Customized."

Facebook members can select a privacy setting for each post by using lock icons next to "share" buttons on profile pages.

"It is going to be far more intuitive for users," Future of Privacy Forum director Jules Polonetsky said of the Facebook privacy control change.

"When we post something is when we think of whom we want it to go to, and this is the first time we will be able to do that."

Regional networks - geographical community groupings that Facebook recently eliminated - led members to unwittingly share profile content with as many as millions of users, according to Polonetsky.

"Facebook has balanced more sharing with less of a chance people won't realize who they are sharing with," Polonetsky said.

This is the first time Facebook users will be able to make "decisions on the fly" about individual posts and updates, he added.

The new tool stems from a revamped privacy policy unveiled earlier this year and is not connected with any advertising or revenue-making scheme, according to Facebook.

"We hope users will recognize this is an unprecedented approach to engaging them around the issue of privacy and control," Schrage said.

"No service or site has ever asked their users to go through this process; it is privacy by design."

Facebook is braced for complaints given that changes at the social networking service routinely trigger protests in the community.

"We will have people who will love what we've done and embrace it, and we will have people distressed and concerned by it," Schrage predicted, adding that Facebook appreciates how passionate its members are about the service.

"We focus on patterns of use afterward, and what we found is when we make changes it is followed by substantially greater involvement on the site and growth," he said.

The new privacy controls also limit the visibility of content created by minors, definded as users under the age of 18.

Even if a minor selects "Everyone," the information they share will be restricted to their "Friends", "Friends of Friends" and school or work networks.

Microsoft May Speed Up to $150 Million in Yahoo Payments

Microsoft Corp. may accelerate up to $150 million in reimbursements due Yahoo Inc. if their proposed Internet search partnership is approved by regulators.

The new timetable disclosed Thursday was among the minor changes that Microsoft and Yahoo made to an agreement reached in July. The companies

signed the final contract last week.

Yahoo may now collect the entire $150 million by June 30 next year if it's working with Microsoft by then. The letter of intent had called for Yahoo to receive $50 million installments from Microsoft during the first three years of their 10-year contract.

Yahoo will also get to keep 88 percent of the revenue generated from the ads appearing alongside the search results, even though Microsoft will be supplying the technology.

In another tweak to the July agreement, Microsoft gave Yahoo the option to continue showing ads from other parties alongside search results in Hong Kong and Korea. If Yahoo exercises this right, it won't receive the same revenue guarantees from Microsoft as other countries covered in their proposed partnership.

Microsoft and Yahoo want to team up in a bid to undercut Google Inc.'s dominance in the lucrative Internet search market.

The companies are hoping antitrust regulators will approve their alliance early next year.

You've Got Freedom: AOL Ends Ties with Time Warner

AOL is shaking loose from Time Warner Inc. and heading into the next decade the way it began this one, as an independent company. Unlike the 1990s, though, when AOL got rich selling dial-up Internet access, it starts the 2010s as an underdog, trying to beef up its Web sites and grab more advertising revenue.

Despite a few bright spots in its portfolio of sites, such as tech blog Engadget, AOL has a long way to go until Web advertising can replace the revenue it still gets from selling dial-up Internet access. One especially popular property, entertainment site TMZ, is a joint venture with a Time Warner unit that will keep TMZ and its revenue after AOL splits off.

Now investors are getting a chance to place bets on AOL. On Wednesday, Time Warner shareholders as of Nov. 27 will get one share of AOL for every 11 of their Time Warner shares. The next morning, AOL CEO Tim Armstrong is set to ring the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange, and AOL will begin trading under the ticker symbol of the same name - the one it had when it was known as America Online and used $147 billion worth of its inflated stock to buy Time Warner in 2001.

The parent company was even known as AOL Time Warner in the heyday. At the time, Time Warner thought its movie, TV and magazine content would benefit from ties with AOL's Internet access business. The media conglomerate announced AOL's spinoff in May after years of trying unsuccessfully to integrate the two companies.

AOL will initially be worth about $2.5 billion, based on the value of preliminary AOL shares that have been trading ahead of the formal spinoff this week. AOL will have no debt, and the company is profitable, though falling - operating income dropped 50 percent to $134 million in the third quarter compared with last year.

In the past year, AOL hired Armstrong, 38, a former Google advertising executive, to engineer a turnaround that eluded the company while it was part of Time Warner.

In those years, AOL struggled to complete its transition away from relying on its dial-up business. The service peaked in 2002 with 26.7 million subscribers, and has declined steadily as consumers switched to broadband. In the third quarter, AOL had 5.4 million dial-up subscribers, who paid an average of $18.54 per month.

Even with the decline, this business brought in $332 million during the quarter, or 43 percent of AOL's total revenue. But that's down from $1.8 billion, or 82 percent of revenue, during its peak quarter seven years earlier.

Overall third-quarter revenue dropped 23 percent from last year to $777 million.

AOL has tried to offset the fading service by moving away from its origins as a "walled garden" with subscriber-only content to a network of online destinations with free material, supported by ads. AOL even began giving away AOL.com e-mail accounts.

The results have been mixed. After initially showing promise, AOL's ad revenue fell last year and in each of the first three quarters of this year. AOL's advertising shortfall in the third quarter - an 18 percent decline from the same period a year ago - was much worse than the 5.4 percent drop in overall Web ad market, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP.

Another problem: AOL's more than 80 Web sites are struggling to keep their viewers. In the third quarter, AOL's network had 102 million unique visitors in the U.S., according to comScore, a 7 percent drop from 110 million a year ago. By contrast, Google and Yahoo both showed gains of more than 10 percent.

AOL has responded partly with plans to shed up to 2,500 jobs, or more than a third of its employees, in an effort to save $300 million a year. That comes on top of thousands of other cuts in recent years and will leave the company at less than a quarter the size it was at its peak in 2004. The cost-cutting has allowed AOL to stay profitable despite shrinking revenue.

AOL also is trying to produce online material far more cheaply. It plans to launch dozens of new sites next year and populate much of them with work done by freelancers. These freelancers will be paid by the post - some with a flat rate, some with a share of revenue based on the amount of traffic the post generates.

Ned May, an analyst with Outsell Inc., believes AOL can use this low-cost method to experiment with building lots of new sites and see what sticks with viewers.

To stimulate the process, AOL is counting on a content-management system it calls Seed. It shows information about the kinds of things people are searching for online so that writers and editors can quickly create material people presumably want to read.

For example, a site might traditionally write about Halloween costumes

in mid-September, but search data showed that people were looking for costumes in August, said Bill Wilson, AOL’s head of media.

"There was this whole window we were missing," Wilson said.

Gabelli & Co. analyst Christopher Marangi believes AOL will have to figure out how to better integrate social networking into its sites. AOL owns a social site called Bebo, which is popular overseas but gets about 6 percent as many visitors as Facebook does in the U.S., according to comScore data.

Being its own company again means AOL will regain the freedom to use its resources solely for its own benefit, rather than worrying about how they fit into the Time Warner empire. If the stock performs well, it could become a currency AOL can use to snag employees and acquire other companies.

Of course, now the world also will be able to more closely follow whether AOL is making progress on its strategy.

"That may be a challenge," Armstrong said, "but I think it’s a challenge we knew we were signing up for whether we were public or private."

Dell To Reveal Android Tablet At CES?

Various sources hinted this Thursday that Dell could be gearing up to reveal a new tablet device at January’s Consumer Electronics Show (CES). If the rumors are true, it could really make 2010 the year of the tablet.

A source, speaking to Pocket-Lint, detailed that the tablet is expected to run on Google’s Android OS and feature a distinctly sized 5-inch touchscreen. The product, which could be the previously sighted Dell Streak, is rumored to launch in the UK first, with a US date to follow.

Word on Dell’s next foray into the tablet market comes at an interesting time, with ongoing rumors of an Apple tablet, and plenty of discussion surronding Fusion Garage’s recently renamed JooJoo.

When pressed further about Dell’s plans, the company officially responded with a typical cover-all statement: "Dell continually develops and tests new products that extend the mobile experience. We have not made any product announcements and do not comment on speculation, rumor, or unannounced products."

Of course rumors surrounding a Dell tablet are nothing new, but it looks like we will have to wait and see what comes out of Las Vegas this January at CES.

Apple To Launch Tablet in Spring 2010

Apple Inc is preparing to launch a tablet personal computer in late March or April, with manufacturer partners poised to roll out as many as 1 million units per month, according to an Oppenheimer research note.

The highly anticipated tablet is expected to pitch Apple into the digital book market popularized by Amazon.com's Kindle e-reader. Apple declined to comment.

Oppenheimer analyst Yair Reiner said the new tablet could boost Apple's earnings per share by 25 cents to 38 cents per quarter, assuming that it sells 1 million to 1.5 million units each quarter at an average price of $1,000 and a corporate average net income margin of 22 percent.

"Our checks into Apple's supply chain indicate that the manufacturing cogs for the tablet are creaking into action and should begin to hit a mass market stride in February," Reiner wrote.

"The February ramp schedule suggests a late March or April commercial release, since Apple will need to build at least 5-6 weeks of inventory before going live."

He said the tablet will have a 10.1-inch multitouch LCD screen similar to that of Apple's iPhone.

Apple has also approached book publishers to distribute their content electronically, and has offered them a revenue cut of 70 percent without requiring exclusivity, Reiner said.

He said that compares favorably to the Kindle's 50 percent deal, and that Kindle only offers a 70 percent cut to publishers that give Amazon exclusive rights.

"As innovative as it is, we believe the Kindle has disgruntled the publishing industry (book, newspaper, and magazine) by demanding exclusivity, disallowing advertising, and demanding a wolfish cut of revenue," Reiner wrote. "The tablet is set to change that."

Thunderbird 3 Adds Tabs and E-Mail Searching

Mozilla on Tuesday launched Thunderbird 3, a revamped version its e-mail application, hoping it will do for Mozilla Messaging what Firefox 3 did for Mozilla's browser. With the same web-page rendering and graphics infrastructure as Firefox, Thunderbird is available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux.

The free program supports 50 languages and allows each message to be opened in its own tab, rather than a window. The tab system is also Firefox's claim to fame. When the program is restarted, it remembers which tabs were open.

But the highlight of Thunderbird 3 is its search and tracking abilities. It provides a bar graph for a visual time line of when messages arrive. An intelligent filtering system allows users to display messages by month, date, year or recipient and receiver. Search results are saved in a virtual folder.

According to Mozilla's web site, the search feature will allow users to "accurately pinpoint the exact e-mail by word matches, correspondents or even attachment types at the moment they need it, all based on analysis of the user's own e-mails."

Thunderbird 3 also boasts a quick address-book update that allows users to add contacts just by clicking on a star icon in the new message. Numerous available add-ons, such as the Google calendar, can also be displayed by tab.

"We have some of the most passionate users on the planet who want a personal and familiar e-mail experience - they choose Thunderbird because it’s flexible and they can customize it to be exactly how they want," said David Ascher, CEO of Mozilla Messaging, a subsidiary of the Mozilla Foundation.

Simplicity is a selling point, and Mozilla said getting started with the setup wizard is easier than in previous versions. The new wizard works with e-mail addresses and passwords instead of torturing users for their IMAP, SMTP and SSL/TLS settings.

According to ARS Technical blogger Ryan Paul, who tested the program, the only weakness is that there isn’t enough room to display all the search results.

"You have to click a ’More’ button at the end of the excerpts to retrieve additional items," he wrote. "This can be frustrating in cases where I don’t remember enough specific details about a desired message to get to it quickly with the filtering features."

Thunderbird isn’t likely to put a dent in Microsoft Outlook or Exchange usage.

"Typically these types of e-mail clients are for the home or casual users, for personal e-mail, not corporate stuff," said Mordy Hackel of New York-based KJ Technology, a consulting firm for residential and midsize businesses. "Although I’m sure it can be integrated to a Linux Notes or Microsoft Exchange server, you are better off with the native client."

2010 Will be the Year of the Tablet Computer

In China, 2010 will be the year of the Tiger. In the tech world, 2010 will be the year of the Tablet - or so it seems. A bevy of tech companies have teased, talked, and have not denied rumors that they are working on a fabled tablet computer. Here is a look back at 2009 tablet buzz with a look forward to 2010 - the year of the Tablet.

Asustek is rumored to be working on an Eee Pad, according to Digitimes. Rumors of a Dell tablet won’t go away. Earlier this year, rumors of a Microsoft two-panel tablet appeared after Gizmodo got its hands on one of Redmond’s concept videos. And starting Friday, the JooJoo Web tablet is supposed to go on sale for $499 at thejoojoo.com.

And of course there is the ever-present Apple rumor that "soon" it will introduce a tablet.

Let’s take a look at the hottest tablets that may, or may not, be hitting store shelves next year.

**The JooJoo **

Many of the tablets being discussed online are highly fictional at the moment, but the JooJoo is one tablet that's already here. This device has a 12-inch touchscreen with 1366-by-768 resolution capable of displaying 720p high-definition videos. The processor is rumored to be a 1.6GHz Intel Atom chip, other specs include 1 GB RAM, 4GB solid-state drive for caching Web content, one USB 2.0 port, Webcam, microphone, headphone jack, and Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connectivity (no 3G).

The device is supposed to go on sale online as of Friday, December 11 for $499. But at the time of this writing the Website was still not accepting preorders, and that functionality may not come online today. As you may know, the JooJoo is mired in controversy due to its previous incarnation as the CrunchPad, which was to be a joint venture between TechCrunch and Fusion Garage. Early Friday, TechCrunch Founder Michael Arrington confirmed that his company had filed a lawsuit against Fusion Garage. It's not clear what effect this lawsuit might have, but Fusion Garage could be forced to suspend sales of the JooJoo, at least temporarily.

While you're waiting for the legal system to settle the matter, check out PC World's first-look video and hands-on review to learn more about the JooJoo.

In June, rumors of an iPod Touch-like device from Dell started surfacing, and now there are reports that Dell is set to reveal this 'tablet' at the Consumer Electronics Show in January. Details are scarce, but according to the latest rumors, the Dell device would run Google's Android operating system and have a 5-inch touchscreen.

Of course, it's a bit of a stretch to call this device a tablet in the Apple sense, in fact, this device sounds more like a mobile Internet device (MID). MIDs are nothing new and have been around for some time. Samsung made a splash at this year's CTIA trade show in Las Vegas when it introduced the Mondi: a 4.3-inch LCD touch display device, with 4GB of onboard memory running Windows Mobile, hardware QWERTY keyboard, and WiMax support.

Dell's device could also be a multimedia player designed to compete directly with the iPod Touch and Zune HD. The Dell device will supposedly be available first in the U.K. on an unspecified date, with a U.S. launch to follow. Check out this video below that purports to show off this Inspiro-tablet.

Details about Asustek's plans are even more scarce than information about Dell's device. DigiTimes says the device will be called the Eee Pad, and will have a 4- to 7-inch touchscreen, and will include a combination of MID and regular PC functions. Again, another device that sounds like a prime competitor for the iPod Touch and Zune HD. DigiTimes says the Eee Pad suggests may have been inspired by Apple's rumored device.

Tablets have been on Asustek's agenda for some time, and the company recently got into multi-touch with the release of the T91MT, a tablet notebook with an 8.9-inch screen. Asus has also been working on a dual-panel laptop/e-reader that was supposed to be released by the end of 2009.

Courier, this device would sport two 7-inch screens (presumably in color), a built-in camera on the back and Wi-Fi. Instead of a physical keyboard, the device would use a combination of multitouch and stylus inputs.

(Image of Courier, right, is from Gizmodo.

Unlike the other tablets that have a multimedia focus, the concept reportedly being considered by Microsoft is geared toward creating a digital recreation of a two-page paper day planner. Of course, that description doesn't do the Courier concept complete justice, as the device would include sketching and design capabilities as well.

I almost forgot; no tablet roundup would be complete without mentioning that rumored device from Cupertino, California. The supposed Apple Tablet would be a device with a 9- to 10-inch screen, and would basically be a larger iPod Touch priced as high as $1000. Although there is no verifiable proof this tablet exists it has already been hailed as the possible savior of books, newspapers, magazines and a better-than-average movie experience.

You have to hand it to Apple. Even when the company officially says nothing, while rumors of the device run rampant, the team at 1 Infinite Loop has managed to influence the future plans of rival computer manufacturers and other industries that have an eye towards the digital future. Now that's influence.

Google Says Utah Company Behind Online Scam

Google Inc. says a Utah company is using its name to defraud consumers.

The Internet leader filed a federal lawsuit Tuesday against Pacific WebWorks Inc., a Salt Lake City company that claims it pays people thousands of dollars a month simply to post links for certain Web sites.

The Utah Better Business Bureau say it's just another work-at-home scam that lets the company charge people's bank accounts for useless moneymaking kits.

Utah incorporation records list a Christian Lars as president of Pacific WebWorks Inc. in the warehouse district of Salt Lake City.

A man who answered Pacific WebWorks' phone refused to answer questions Tuesday from The Associated Press.

FBI: Rogue Antivirus Scammers Have Made $150 Million

They're the scourge of the Internet right now and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation says they've also raked in more than US$150 million for scammers. Security experts call them rogue antivirus programs.

The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center issued a warning over this fake antivirus software Friday, saying that Web surfers should be wary of sudden pop-up windows that report security problems on their computers.

This software can appear almost anywhere on the Web. Typically, the scam starts with an aggressive pop-up advertisement that looks like some sort of virus scan. Often it's nearly impossible to get rid of the pop-up windows. Of course, the scan turns up problems, and the pop-up windows

say the only way to get rid of them is to pull out a credit card and pay.

This is always a bad idea. At best, the software is subpar. At worst, it "could result in viruses, Trojans and/or keyloggers being installed on the user's computer," the IC3 said in its warning. The IC3 is run in partnership with the National White Collar Crime Center.

"The assertive tactics of the scareware [have] caused significant losses to users," the IC3 said. "The FBI is aware of an estimated loss to victims in excess of $150 million."

Scareware peddlers have pushed their ads on legitimate ad networks. The New York Times was tricked into running rogue antivirus ads in September by a scammer pretending to work for Vonage. Sometimes, the scammers simply hack into Web sites and use attack code to put their software on the victim's computer.

Last month, webcams sold by Office Depot contained links to a hacked Web site that tried to download rogue antivirus.

The IC3 says that users who see these unexpected antivirus pop-up warnings should shut down their browsers or their computers immediately and then run an antivirus scan to see what's going on.

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